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SUBJECT: VIETNAM OFFERS AMNESTY TO SIX RELIGIOUS PRISONERS

Reftels: A) Hanoi 254, B) HCMC 106

¶11. (SBU) The MFA informed us April 26 that Vietnam will offer amnesties to six individuals whom the United States had highlighted as cases of concern for religious reasons. In addition, Mennonite Le Thi Hong Lien, for whom we had requested the GVN provide appropriate medical care, will also be given an amnesty. No high-profile political prisoners were included in this special round of amnesties, which will mark the 30th anniversary of Vietnam's reunification on April 30 (a total of 7820 people are to receive amnesties on this occasion). Presenting the amnesty list to the DCM, Assistant Foreign Minister and Americas Department Director Nguyen Duc Hung asked that we "tell Washington that Vietnam is cooperating in good faith with the United States on religion and CPC issues." The MFA did not provide information on whether any American citizens are included in the amnesty, which will officially be announced on April 27. (Note: We will follow up on this matter. End note.)

¶12. (U) Five of the six prisoners are ethnic H'mong Protestants from the Northwest Highlands who had been imprisoned for reasons related to their faith. The sixth is Catholic Pastor Pham Minh Tri, a.k.a. Pham Ngoc Lien, who was imprisoned in 1987. We have previously received conflicting information on Pastor Tri. In September 2004, the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington indicated to the Department that he had been released in March 2004. In February 2005, however, amnestied Buddhist monk Thich Thien Minh reported that Pastor Tri was still imprisoned and suffering from dementia.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: While not wiping the slate clean, the amnesties show an effort by the GVN to be responsive to our requests on religious freedom. The releases significantly shorten our list of religious prisoners in Vietnam. End Comment.

¶14. (U) List of amnesty recipients:

-- Father Pham Minh Tri (Pham Ngoc Lien): Member of the Order of the Mother Co-Redemptrix. Pastor Tri was arrested in 1987 and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for "sabotaging the national unity policy." His sentence was commuted by 24 months and was set to expire in March 2005. The GVN said he was released in March 2004, but another prisoner alleged that he remained in prison. Pastor Tri is reported to be suffering from dementia.

-- Vang Mi Ly: Protestant church leader from Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province. Quang was arrested in December 2003 and sentenced to 26 months in prison for helping to organize "gatherings that caused public disorder" after arranging unauthorized religious services.

-- Ly Xin Quang: Protestant church leader from Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province. Quang was arrested in December 2003 and sentenced to 26 months in prison for helping to organize "gatherings that caused public disorder" after arranging unauthorized religious services.

-- Vang Chin Sang: Protestant church leader from Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province. Quang was arrested in December 2003 and sentenced to 36 months in prison for helping to organize "gatherings that caused public disorder" after arranging unauthorized religious services.

-- Ly Chin Seng: Protestant church leader from Hoang Su Phi District, Ha Giang Province. Quang was arrested in December 2003 and sentenced to 36 months in prison for helping to organize "gatherings that caused public disorder" after arranging unauthorized religious services.

-- Mua A Chau (Ma A Chau): Hmong Protestant from Lai Chau Province. Chau was detained on March 5, 2003, after an altercation with police officers. On June 18, 2003, he was found guilty of "resisting a person carrying out official duties" and sentenced to 36 months in prison. Chau's family alleged that Chau frequently had been harassed and was imprisoned as a result of his faith.

-- Le Thi Hong Lien (Ref B): One of six Mennonites arrested in June 2004 and sentenced by a court in Ho Chi Minh City for "resisting persons in the performance of their official duties," stemming from an altercation with police in March 2004. She was sentenced to one year in prison. During her incarceration, Lien apparently began to suffer from mental difficulties. The Ambassador and Consul General interceded with Vietnamese authorities to ensure that she was provided adequate mental health care while in prison. The Mission does not consider Lien a prisoner of conscience, however.

MARINE